

Italian Armistice

As Remembered by Giulio Verro

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On July 10, 1943 the Allied Forces landed on the Island of Sicily. On July 25, 1943 it was announced on Italian radio that King *Vittorio Emanuele III* asked for and accepted the resignation of Benito Mussolini from his duties as chief of government, prime minister, and secretary of state and appointed in his place Marshal of Italy Pietro Badoglio, and that the king himself was assuming the command of Armed Forces. Having lost Mussolini as their ally, the Germans poured their troops into Italy to control the military situation.

After the Allies occupied a part of southern Italy, the king and Badoglio's government established themselves in the southern part of Italy at Salerno.¹ On September 8, 1943 we heard on Italian radio that the king had signed an armistice between the Italian Kingdom and the Allies, ceasing all warfare between the two sides. And on October 13, 1943 Prime Minister Badoglio announced that the king had declared war on Germany.

Meanwhile, in October 1943 Mussolini, with the help of the Germans, formed a government in northern Italy that he named the Italian Social Republic, also known as the Republic of Salò, taking its name from the small village on the western shore of Lake Garda where it was located. Political and civil chaos erupted in the country now divided into two parts.

Our Flight Assistance unit stationed in Greece was equipped with radio receivers and we could follow most of what was announced by the two Italian governments. But our military command headquarters in Athens was not issuing any explanations or orders to us about the situation, or which of these two governments was in charge of our military units in Greece. We continued our duties as we had before.

For about a week after the armistice there were no changes in our situation at the Flight Assistance center. Then one morning our German interpreter came without our Italian officers, with whom he had usually come before; instead he came with a German officer who announced that since Italy was no longer Ally with the Germany they would send us back to Italy.

After that announcement, we didn't see our Italian officers anymore. German officer ordered us to give up all our weapons, radio, and other communication equipment, and all trucks. We didn't question the authority of the Germans to requisition it because it seemed logical that they would not allow us to take it back to Italy. The German officer also ordered us to stay in our dormitory and wait for further orders. We were all so happy, innocently believing that for us the war was over. Only a few young men who had Greek girlfriends didn't want to go back home and they disappeared soon after this announcement.

In a couple of days Germans came and collected our weapons. They told us to get ready and wait for the train that would take us home. We divided among ourselves all food provisions remaining in the storage room and packed them in our military backpacks for the journey.

On the day when we were packing our belongings, Toni, the German interpreter, came to see us to say good-bye. He was sitting on one of the bunk beds chatting with us when we moved the locker and behind it found the wrinkled and dusty portrait of Adolf Hitler that Toni had given us as a present. I don't remember if it was Bruno or I, but one of us grabbed the portrait and started to dust it and smooth it out. Then Toni, indignant at how disrespectfully we had treated his *Fuhrer*, took it from us and shaking his head mumbled German swear words at us, "*Ferfluchte Italianische Menschen.*"² After this happened, Toni's good-bye lost its friendliness he had for us before.

We waited again about two days before the Germans came with the truck and took us to the railroad station in Athens. There was a long train with freight cars already filled with Italian soldiers and *Alpini*,³ who saluted us as we were passing by to our freight car. Anticipating a journey home, a general joyous mood prevailed among the young Italian servicemen. We could hear an Italian folk song accompanied by a guitar coming from one of the cars.

When the train finally started its voyage north it was moving slowly at about thirty kilometers per hour. It was hot and many young men climbed on the car roofs, where the breeze made it more pleasant to travel. As we were crossing Greek territory, the train stopped often and waited sometimes for a half-hour or more at the stations. There were about thirty men in each freight car. From the time we boarded the train in Athens we were left without any food for three days. We were lucky that each of us was carrying in our military backpacks the provisions that we had divided from our storage room.

As the train continued to travel north across Yugoslavia, the weather changed. It was cold and the men no longer climbed on the car roofs and, to keep the cold air out, we all closed the car doors. It took a while for somebody to notice that the train did not change direction at some point and, instead of turning south toward Italy, it continued to travel north. But even when we became aware of this, we probably were not worrying about it, guessing that maybe it had to make a detour, which was very common during wartime.

After the train entered the territory of former Austria, a large number of German soldiers surrounded the train and locked all the doors of the freight cars so no one would attempt to escape. After this happened, our hopes of going home vanished. In Austria the train continued to travel north. After that, the only food we received each day was about one liter of watered-down soup made with turnips and no bread. The men from our unit still had some food in their backpacks, which some of us decided to ration to ourselves.

Finally, one evening when it was almost dark, the train stopped near an enormous camp encircled with barbwire. The German soldiers counted about twenty-five men from each car and directed each group to the earth barracks. Actually, those were holes dug into the earth and covered with roofs.